

Applying Differential Coercion and Social Support Theory to Police Officers' Misconduct

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study is to test differential coercion and social support theory on police officers' misconduct. Data from the *Police Stress and Domestic Violence in Police Families in Baltimore, Maryland, 1997–1999* are analyzed to test the propositions of the theory. Specifically, we test whether this theory can explain intimate partner violence (IPV) and problematic drinking perpetrated by police officers. Results indicated that two types of coercion (out of five) were significant in predicting IPV perpetration, while two alternate forms of coercion were significant in predicting problematic alcohol consumption. Anger was the only significant social-psychological deficit in predicting both dependent variables. Social support, mainly from family/friends and the department, only decreased the odds of problematic alcohol consumption. The current study provides further evidence that victimization continues to be one of the most consistent forms of coercion most likely to lead to criminal behavior.

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In the past decade differential coercion and social support theory (DCSS) emerged as a developing theoretical paradigm with strong roots attributed to general strain theory, yet since the theory's inception little empirical attention has explored the core theoretical principles or whether it can explain different types of criminal behavior among various study populations. The theoretical framework argues that *coercion*—forces that induces or intimidates an individual to act because of the fear or anxiety it generates—is a driving forces for criminal behavior and delinquency. Coercion produces what Colvin (2000) called “social-psychological deficits” that includes anger, lower self-control, weaker social bonds, and coercive ideation. Higher levels of anger, along with weak social bonds and lower self-control, increase the likelihood of criminal behavior. On the other hand, *social support* prevents crime and is defined as “the delivery (or perceived delivery) of assistance from communities, social networks, and confiding partners in meeting the instrumental and expressive needs of individuals” (Colvin, Cullen, and Vander Ven 2002: 20). Expressive support may come in the form of emotional care and reaffirming someone's importance and dignity, while instrumental support means providing material and financial assistance. Expressive and instrumental support may come from family, friends, a person's social network, and social institutions such as schools, a person's workplace, and governmental agencies. Support prevents crime by providing individuals an outlet to cope with hardship through noncriminal means (Colvin et al. 2002).

One important aspect for developing DCSS remains exploration of the major theoretical tenants with various populations. Given the substantial research evidence that some police officers perpetrate acts of intimate partner violence (IPV) (Anderson and Lo 2011; Erwin et al. 2005; Gibson, Swatt, and Jolicoeur 2001; Stinson and Liederbach 2013; Zavala 2013a) and studies suggesting that some officers may abuse alcohol because of the stressful nature of law enforcement (Chopko, Palmieri, and Adams